

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time + 20 August 2023 + Isa 56 + Mt 15:21-28

Our Gospel today presents us with an immediate challenge: we hear Jesus seem to put down a Gentile woman, who makes of him a heart-felt request on behalf of her tormented daughter. “Dogs” was a common derogatory word used to describe the non-Jewish nations (Gentiles) during the time of Christ. But obviously, the same Jesus who taught His followers to love not only neighbors but also enemies could not put down this woman and maintain any sort of integrity. So, why did he use that term? What is going on here?

Well, the immediate context of today’s readings is the inclusion of the Gentiles into God’s plan of salvation of the human race through Jesus Christ. While the call of God and the gifts of His covenant were first offered to the Jewish people, this call was never meant to be *exclusively* theirs. Rather, Israel was chosen so as to be a light to the nations. The goal was that the “foreign” nations, the Gentiles, would see their relationship with God and be drawn into the Covenant. But sadly, that was not how things usually ended up working out. The Law of the Old Covenant was often used as a “wall” to drive away the so-called “unclean” Gentiles. And this unfortunate situation is context of our somewhat puzzling Gospel today.

And so Jesus is first mirroring, while certainly not endorsing, the typical Jewish approach to the Gentiles at that time. But much to this woman’s credit, she was not about to back down. And that brings us to the 2nd “layer” of meaning, so to speak, of our Gospel today: Jesus is testing the woman’s faith. And she passes that test with flying colors. In fact, we encounter few people in the Gospels, Jew or Gentile, whose faith is as strong as this woman’s. And so Jesus’ approval of her faith here foreshadows the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Covenant through faith and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that would come at Pentecost.

So, you might also be wondering, why all this fuss about the Gentiles? Well, as I mentioned, the notion that the Gentiles too could be saved was quite revolutionary during the time of Christ. It was never completely lacking—our 1st reading from the Prophet Isaiah, spoken many centuries before Christ, proves this. But the opening up of the Covenant to Gentiles was still a radical idea that did not set well with many of the religious authorities at that time. But some 2,000 years after the fact, all this may seem rather perplexing to us. We take for granted the fact that God chose to include all nations—which includes us—in His plan of salvation through Christ. In fact, the last 2,000 years of human history has been a story of the gradual spread of the Gospel to all nations.

There was a time not all that long ago, in our country, at least, where we could barely build churches fast enough. But now, that is over. We are entering into uncharted territory, where formerly Christian civilizations are abandoning the faith an alarming rate, with terrible consequences that we see all around us. We know the Lord would not have us give up. So in the face of such a disturbing situation, what would He have us do?

Well, I believe that a way forward for us is found in our 1st reading today. In this prophecy from Isaiah, we hear of a future gathering of the nations to worship the true God on His Holy Mountain, which is a prophecy of the gathering of all nations into the Church. Maybe an image here might help. The very old Disney movie *Fantasia* ends with a wonderfully Christian vision. After the dark, frightful night on “bald mountain,” a small angelus bell is sounded, the devils are driven back to the underworld, and there is a candlelight procession through a cathedral-like woods toward the rising sun, all set to Schubert’s hauntingly beautiful Ave Maria. Even as a child, I remember being captivated by it all.

Now I know this is just a movie, but I think it’s a good image for what all of us need to have engraved into eyes of our hearts. That is, eyes open to see life as it really is: a battle between good and evil, where souls are at stake. Yes, Christ has already won the victory, but Satan hasn’t gotten the message yet, and so we fight on. Life is not about amassing a fortune, seizing political power, making a name for ourselves or crossing off items on a bucket list. Life is about God our Father, who loves every soul He has ever made, and wants nothing more than for all of us to be with Him and so to know abundant and eternal life.

But sin has gotten in the way. Without Christ, we are separated from God, without hope of eternal life. And as good as this life can be, if this is all that there is, it is ultimately meaningless. That kind of despair is like a cloud that hangs over all who believe they have matured beyond God and sin and salvation and heaven and hell, and so many people today do anything they can to distract themselves from having to consider the big questions in life. But imagine what this life would be like if everyone knew—if everyone believed that they are infinitely precious in the sight of God, that mercy and forgiveness are available in Jesus Christ, and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit, as a well-spring leading up to eternal life!

So, how can we help this beautiful vision become reality, especially here in our own community? Well, it starts with correct vision. But just seeing correctly is not enough; vision must lead to witness. According to our 1st reading, those who are acceptable to God give witness to the following qualities: they *minister to* that is, *serve him*. And this means that they are not self-serving. They also *love the name of the LORD*. If they love this name so much, then they are passionate about it, and not afraid to lovingly speak it in public. Furthermore, they *keep the Sabbath free from profanation*. If Sunday is not a day of worship and re-creation and family, then we’ll never even get out of the gate.

Finally, we hear that God gathers the just ones from all nations to His Holy Mountain, the Church, so that it may be *a house of prayer for all peoples*. All Christian activity must start with prayer, and lead back to prayer. And not just a quick *Hail Mary* when we are in trouble, but the daily prayer of praise and thanksgiving, conversation and petition, adoration and listening. This is the prayer of faith of the Canaanite woman that won such high praise from Jesus, and that won healing for her daughter. This is the prayer that can bring our lost and wandering loved ones back the loving arms of the Good Shepherd.